

Soldiers

Online

California's SHERPA



Story and Photos by Steve Harding



THE boxy, high-winged aircraft taxiing toward the main runway at California's Fresno Yosemite International Airport definitely wouldn't be mistaken for a commuter airliner. Painted drab gray and bearing black "U.S. Army" stencils, it seems out of place among the airport's other, sleeker visitors.

Yet the airplane, one of the California Army National Guard's two C-23A Sherpas, is building a reputation as one of the best passenger haulers in the Golden State — for military personnel, that is.

Operated by Detachment 1 of Company I, 185th Theater Aviation Battalion, the Sherpas' primary mission is to provide fixed-wing support for a theater of war, as they did during Operation Desert Storm. Det. 1 is attached to the Fresno Aviation Classification Repair Activity Depot,

which repairs and maintains Army Guard aircraft based in 13 western states [see sidebar]. One of the missions the C-23s perform is transporting parts and supplies among Guard facilities throughout the West.

"And the Sherpa is sensational for that mission," said COL Bradford M. Jones, the California National Guard's director of aviation and safety. "It's big enough inside to accommodate virtually any repair part or piece of equipment we need to move, and it can get into and out of relatively short runways."

The Sherpa does have its limitations as a cargo hauler, however.

"The C-23A is relatively slow, it's not pressurized and its maximum ceiling is only about 14,000 feet, so it can't go over the weather," Jones said.

And then there are the mountains. "The western United States is dotted with ranges of mountains — the Sierra Nevadas, the Rockies — that are much higher than those in the east," said CW4 Mike Burke, Det. 1's commander. "And though the Sherpa is a very capable aircraft, its performance limitations at high altitude make it very difficult for the airplane to haul a load of heavy parts over the mountains."

BIRTH OF A SHUTTLE

Faced with the Sherpa's restrictions, Burke and his colleagues began looking for an additional mission that would make better use of the C-23's capabilities, while at the same time

EXPRESS



ensuring that Guard aviators maintained their proficiency in the aircraft.

"We sort of put our heads together," Burke said, "and asked ourselves what the aircraft was most capable of, and how we could best use the flying hours we're allocated. The consensus was that, since the Sherpa was originally designed as a short-haul airliner, we'd be best used by carrying Department of Defense passengers throughout the western states at altitudes of less than 10,000 feet."

The aviators developed a plan that would allow the Sherpa to do what it does best — haul people — while at the same time dramatically reducing the military's reliance on costly and inflexible commercial airline transportation.

"We discovered that using the C-23s to shuttle DOD personnel throughout the region on operational support

airlift missions would have several benefits," Burke said. "It would usefully employ the aircraft, reduce commercial travel costs and contribute to the flight proficiency of air crews. In addition, it would make more efficient use of training time, because instead of having personnel spending hours on a bus getting from point A to point B, or waiting hours for a commercial flight that might be late or cancelled,



Flight engineer SSG Chris Samaras stands by as his C-23's pilots start the aircraft's engines before leaving Fresno on a flight to Los Angeles.



we could move them quickly to where they needed to be.”

PASSENGER-FRIENDLY

The idea of instituting a Sherpa shuttle service made sense to the California Guard’s senior leaders, who gave the plan the go-ahead in early 1999. But before the service took to the air later in the year, Burke and his colleagues had to do some additional “market research.”

“We took a few commercial shuttle flights, just to get a feel for their procedures,” Burke said. “We also talked to a lot of people about the military passenger flights they’d been on, and about the things they liked and didn’t like on those flights.”

Among the negative things most often cited by those who’d flown aboard military passenger flights, said Det. 1. operations officer CW4 Dennis Spear, were things like being forced to sit aboard a hot and stuffy aircraft for long periods before takeoff, or being treated with something less than courtesy.

“Let’s face it,” Burke said, “lots of times, passengers on military aircraft are just sort of thrown on board and strapped down like cargo.”

“We wanted to eliminate a lot of those negative aspects of the military passenger experience,” Spear said, “so that we would be able to attract the return business that would make this mission work.”

So the detachment decided to emulate the commercial airline experience, in terms of both passenger comfort and the familiarity of the flight. From the way passengers board the aircraft, to the bottled water and snacks, to the takeoff and landing announcements, the whole experience is intended to be as much like a commercial flight as possible.

But making the whole experience

more user-friendly wasn’t easy, Burke said, given the range of regulations and procedures that govern all aspects of military aviation.

“It took months of practice to choreograph the routine we use,” he said. “For example, the flight engineer has to be in a certain place at a certain time during the aircraft start-up sequence and passenger loading, so we had to establish a procedure for getting the passengers from the terminal to the aircraft at the right time, one that wouldn’t endanger them on the ramp or leave them sitting in a hot aircraft whose air conditioning hadn’t been turned on yet.”

And the detachment also had to ensure that passengers for the Sherpa flights were both authorized to use the service and had permission to do so.

“All Sherpa Express flights are set up according to established regulations,” Burke stressed. “Potential users of the aircraft fill out the required mission request, which is staffed through and must be approved by the

proper chain of command.

“We train to the military standards and we perform all the military tasks,” he said. “We don’t cut any corners. We just add another level of service.”

GREAT SERVICE

One of the best “convenience aspects” of the Sherpa Express, Spear said, is that it offers true ramp-to-ramp service. Though the C-23s typically fly into civilian airports, passengers can also be flown directly to most military installations in the region, thus eliminating the need to get from a civilian airport to the final destination.

“And the passengers can set the schedule,” said Det. 1 pilot CW2 Charlie Scharmann, “so they’re not tied to a commercial airline’s timetable. They can call us and tell us when they want to be picked up, and we’ll be there.”

“On top of that,” Burke added, “units can bring their weapons aboard our aircraft and carry them straight to



CW4 Mike Burke scans for other aircraft during a flight over California’s central valley. By flying routes that keep the Sherpa below 10,000 feet, the Guard aviators ensure that the C-23’s performance limitations and lack of pressurization don’t hamper operations.

Fixing the Guard's Aviation Fleet

their destination. That's a service the commercial airlines definitely don't offer."

But the shuttle service's best feature, the aviators said, is that it saves money.

The Sherpas are configured to carry 18 passengers, and on a typical flight from Mather Field in Sacramento to Los Alamitos Army Airfield near Los Angeles, Burke said, the C-23 saves the travelers about \$4,000 in transportation costs when compared to the cost of sending 18 people by commercial aircraft.

SATISFIED CUSTOMERS

In service for just over a year, the California Guard's innovative Sherpa shuttle is a solid hit with its "customers."

"We put passenger feedback cards in every seat-back pocket," Burke said, "and the comments we've gotten have been overwhelmingly positive. There are always a few good-natured complaints about the absence of alcohol and in-flight movies, of course, but other than that people rave about the quality of service. They also like the convenience, the economy and our ability to go virtually anywhere they need to go."

Though the Sherpas continue to undertake a variety of other missions — among them supporting disaster-relief, humanitarian-aid and law-enforcement operations — the passenger-shuttle service answers several needs at once, Burke said.

"It keeps the aircrews proficient, which ensures that they're ready to undertake their mobilization missions; it speeds the movement of personnel throughout the state, saving both time and money; and it uses the aircraft in a role it's ideally suited for," he said. "It's really a win-win situation for all concerned." □

THE primary agency the California Guard's C-23A Sherpas are tasked to support is the state's Aviation Classification and Repair Depot. Located on the east side of Fresno Yosemite International Airport, the AVCRAD provides intermediate-level and limited depot-level maintenance support to Army Guard aviation units in 13 western states, including Alaska and Hawaii. The AVCRAD supports about 550 helicopters, including the UH-1, AH-1, OH-58, UH-60 and AH-64.

The facility includes a huge main hangar where the actual maintenance work is done, a paint shop and a ground-support equipment maintenance area. A small trailer-turned-office on the concrete ramp outside the main hangar houses the Det. 1 Sherpa operators, while the C-23s themselves sit out on the main parking area, just feet from the second trailer that houses the civilian contractors who maintain the Sherpas. On an adjacent parking area sit a dozen or more helicopters of various types, some flight-worthy and others in various stages of disassembly.

"We do a variety of things here," said CW5 Henry Dale Kole, the AVCRAD's maintenance officer.

"They range from the replacement of engines and rotor blades to the repair of major structural damage. We have electronics and weapon-repair shops, we shrink-wrap aircraft for movement by sea and we classify parts for other depots."

And not all of the AVCRAD's work is done in Fresno, Kole said.

"If the condition of the aircraft needing repair renders it unsafe to fly, we'll send a 'contact team' out to where the aircraft is to do the work," he said. "We also support operations overseas by sending people to places like Korea, Germany and Jordan. And when we send a team overseas, it doesn't usually stay in one place — the team members fan out and visit various installations."

The AVCRAD draws its staff from a number of resources. Some of the personnel are National Guard technicians, some are Guard members on state active duty and some are civilians employed by the contractor that handles the painting of Guard aircraft.

Its staff members are the AVCRAD's real strength, Kole said, and their extensive experience allows them to successfully tackle all of the complex repair tasks they face.

"Many of our technicians have been here for 20 years, and they have the knowledge, skill and experience to solve most any problem," he said. "So our people are able to teach as well as repair, and when we send a team somewhere, its members are able to share their extensive knowledge with others."

"I think we do an outstanding job here," Kole said. "And I think if you talk to any of the units we support, they'll tell you the same thing. They are very pleased with the quality of the work we do." — *Steve Harding*



Fresno AVCRAD personnel work on a UH-1, one of about 550 helicopters the facility supports. Workers can perform a range of services, from the installation of new equipment to the repair of major damage.